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Lawmakers seek tighter security on intelligence secrets

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WASHINGTON — The Reagan administration's reluctance to trust Congress with intelligence secrets has sparked carrot-and-stick attempts by lawmakers to resolve the problem in hopes that big surprises — such as the Iran arms deal — will not happen again.

The carrot is an effort by key legislators to improve security procedures on Capitol Hill in response to administration criticism that Congress leaks like a sieve. Senate Intelligence Committee members, for example, now are barred from taking documents or even notes from the panel's guarded offices.

"We're saying we are going to set our house in order now," said Sen. David L. Boren (D., Okla.), the panel's new chairman. "There's no longer any excuse for not dealing with our committee."

The stick is the threat of new, tighter restrictions on covert operations. Legislation introduced this month by House Intelligence Committee Chairman Louis Stokes (D., Ohio) would force the administration beforehand to notify Congress of covert operations, such as the Iran weapons shipments, except in unusual situations.

Underlying both approaches is dissatisfaction with what lawmakers term a familiar Reagan administration pattern: keeping Congress in the dark when secret foreign policy operations are launched.

That disenchantment probably will be on display Tuesday when the Senate Intelligence Committee holds a hearing on the nomination of Robert M. Gates, a career intelligence official, to succeed William J. Casey as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Panel members have said they see Gates' confirmation as an opportunity to focus attention on the strains that have developed in recent years between Congress and the administration over covert projects.

For example, when the administration launched military strikes against Grenada in 1983 and Libya in 1986, congressional leaders were not told of the pending actions until the last minute. Although some lawmakers protested, the criticisms were largely overshadowed by congressional support for both operations.

There has been no such shield for Reagan in the Iran affair. The disclosure that Reagan, in authorizing direct shipments of arms to Iran, instructed that they be kept secret from Congress has jarred lawmakers who complain that Middle Eastern arms dealers were trusted more than they were.

But even as they criticize the administration, some lawmakers also acknowledge that Congress bears some blame for its inability to keep secrets.

Boren, who instituted the new intelligence committee procedures last month, said they are necessary to rebuild the panel's reputation for "being able to keep important national security matters confidential, as they should be."

Committee members said they intend to adopt a lower profile and plug leaks of secret information, such as the draft report of its Iran-contra investigation that the media obtained after the committee voted to keep it secret. "There's a real awareness of it. We all want to improve it," said committee member Arlen Specter (R., Pa.).

Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R., Ill.) said the problem is symptomatic of an increasingly common occurrence in both Congress and the executive branch: the leaking of information for strategic reasons. "If someone doesn't like a policy, they know how to sabotage the policy by leaking it," he said.

In addition to heightened security at the Senate Intelligence Committee, both of the special committees investigating the Iran-contra affair have taken steps to prevent leaks. Staff aides are required to sign statements promising not to disclose information, and the panels' chairmen have vowed to say little about their investigative work until public hearings begin this spring.

At the same time, lawmakers also are considering imposing more restrictions on the administration.

Under current law, covert operations are supposed to be disclosed to the intelligence committees or a select group of congressional leaders in a "timely" manner, usually beforehand.

The Stokes bill would require the president to provide advance written notice of covert operations. In highly unusual situations, a 48-hour delay after approval would be permissible.

Underlying both approaches is the belief that Congress should monitor secret activities. At the least, legislators say, members can provide an administration with an outsider's candid assessment of an operation. Many say the Iran arms deal might never have been approved if top

members of Congress had been allowed to voice their opinions at the outset.

But the trade-off for such monitoring is the risk of leaks as more people are told about a covert operation. And the implications go beyond mere disclosure of secrets: Intelligence professionals warn that sources become skittish about providing information if they suspect their confidentiality may be compromised.

"It's an endemic problem sort of built into the democratic system," said George Carver, a former CIA official, who said he has seen the problem firsthand since he became an intelligence analyst with the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

Said Carver: "I get people from various European governments who say they can be much more candid with me now than they could before — because they didn't trust the people to whom I had to report."

R.A. Zaldivar of The Inquirer Washington Bureau contributed to this article.